WHAT ARE GOOD FRIENDS FOR?

June 2, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Prebyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 2:1-12

"And when they could not bring him to Jesus...they removed the roof...and let down the mat on which the paralytic lay." -Mark 2:4 (NRSV)

#2

It was the kind of telephone call that ministers occasionally receive and, I presume, doctors and counselors and other people as well. This call came years ago, but there have been similar ones since. I did not know the caller. She did not know me. "You're a preacher, aren't you, and you're supposed to talk to people, aren't you?" she asked. I indicated that she was correct on both counts, and the flood gates opened and out came a sad but not unusual story - a teenager, cut off from all contact with her parents, hurt by some very damaging mistakes, pregnant, trying to make her way alone and not doing very well. I did what my training and experience have taught me to do: I listened. And when she asked me directly what I thought she should do, again I drew on my experience and, without infringing on her right to determine her own course of action, I made some gentle but I thought appropriate suggestions: how about contacting your parents or another family member, how about counseling, or any one of the myriad of helpful agencies in the community? She cut me off mid-sentence in language only the young feel free to use. "The hell with that!" she said. "I've heard it all before. I'm just lonely." And she hung up.

It was a reminder that we live in a world where sometimes what people need more desperately than anything else is a friend, a world where people can be radically alone in the middle of a crowded city; a world in which words like "community," "neighbor," "friend," are vestiges of a dim past. Someone suggested that air-conditioning is the culprit. In the small towns from which many of us came, when the weather was hot and humid, people sat on porches in the evening, or walked down the street to visit with neighbors sitting on porches, until the lateness of the hour forced everybody inside. Something important and not altogether healthy may have happened, the editorial suggests, when the first movie theaters installed machines to cool the air and lured people off porches and into dark solitude.

to transition #3

NASA knows that the technology of sustaining human life for extended periods of time in a space station, for instance, will be simple compared to cultivating the trust, acceptance and grace required for human beings to live together, that is to say - friendship.

Modernity, it has been observed, has compressed human relationships into three molds: business, sex and acquaintanceship - acquaintances being those people you smile at on the bus, elevator or grocery store; business relationships include those with whom you work; and sex, I take it, doesn't need to be exegeted - at least here. In any event, a whole category of human relationships is missing, or at least rarely present, in much of the busy life we live. Friendship... which leads me back to an incident in the Gospel of Mark and a small detail which has always intrigued me.

It's remarkable how much of the human story fits into this little story. [see The Courage to Love, William Sloan Coffin, Jr.]

#4

Jesus is at home in Capernaum. So many people crowded in the house to hear him that they spilled out the door and into the street. Four people brought a paralyzed man on a stretcher. It was too crowded to push through so they went up on the roof. It was a house made of an adobe type material, so they actually dug a hole through the roof and lowered their friend down on his stretcher. That must have been a moment! Can you imagine what the owner of the house thought as his roof was being destroyed? Jesus was impressed with the faith of these four people. So he said to the man on the stretcher, "Your sins are forgiven." That's a surprise. No one has said anything about sins. The man's problem is paralysis. Anyone can see that. Besides, only God can forgive sin. Some religious officials in the room object to his presumptuousness. So he turns to the man on the stretcher and says, "Stand up, take your stretcher and walk out of here," which is exactly what the man does.

There are a lot of issues here: the authority of Jesus, the conflict with established religion, the relationship between guilt and paralysis, forgiveness and health, and the whole matter of standing up and walking away. William Sloan Coffin, Jr. thinks the point is the responsibility the man now has as a result of Jesus' love for him. "If it's hell to be guilty it's certainly scarier to be responsible," he wrote and suggests that it doesn't take much imagination to see ourselves on that stretcher. "If Jesus said 'get up and walk' my inclination would be to murmur, 'no thanks, I think I'll just stay here on the stretcher.'" [Ibid, p. 12]

And of course, digging that hole in the roof becomes a paradigm for what churches, including this one, must now do to make themselves accessible to everybody.

That's all going on inside this little story, but I am most fascinated by the role played by the man's four friends; by the way they model friendship, by their determination and ingenuity and ultimate commitment to their friend on the stretcher. They will do whatever they have to do to get him in ~~Jesus' presence~~ help. to #5 (95 P2)

And perhaps the most significant thing of all about this incident is a detail you can miss if you are not careful: it is their faith - which I take to mean their committed behavior on behalf of their friend - it is their faith that gets the paralyzed man forgiven and cured. The story never mentions his faith - or whether he has any, or whether he even wants to be there. It invites you to imagine him saying something like, "It's

all right. Don't bother. I'll be okay. Maybe we can come back some other time when it's not so crowded and he's not so busy."

Jesus saw their faith, saw the strength of their commitment to their friend, called it faith and it was enough.

People who reflect on the human condition almost unanimously conclude that friendship is a casualty of modern life. C. S. Lewis said once that the modern world simply ignores friendship. Ellen Goodman says friendship is undervalued and underrated and thinks we should be much more intentional about making friends. She wrote:

> "We are friends. We cook for each other. We hold parties for each other's birthdays, promotions, pregnancies. We spend dozens of Saturday nights and occasional weekends together. Our children call us by first names. We are remembered when they say prayers or sell raffle tickets."

It may be one of the truly redeeming words the church has to say, and one of the redeeming services it has to perform - the nurturing of friendship in a world that is inclined to be too busy.

So there are attempts to be the place where friendship can happen - coffee hours and lunches and brunches - opportunities for communion to happen as bread is broken and cups are lifted around the Communion table and the lunch table. It's a great lesson that every young clergyperson has to learn. In seminary you are taught a bit of academic disdain for some of the mundane activities church people love and which often, as a side benefit, generate money. The most important events of the year in the small church where I started were the Women's Bazaar and the Men's Spaghetti Dinner. What an education to come to grips with the fact that more of them were interested in potholders and white elephants than my learned homilies on incarnation; that men would happily plunge their arms into a kettle of spaghetti sauce, who were rarely in the pews on Sunday morning. Was there something of importance here? You bet, and it is about friendship and the fact that at the very heart the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so corporate, so social, that it's hard even to talk about it apart from some community, some group of friends like those four who carried their paralyzed friend to Jesus.

We know there is something radically wrong when church doesn't cultivate and celebrate its corporateness. I read a travel book one time written by an American couple visiting Scotland. They suggested that if you wanted to know the people, the village pub was the place to go. There you would find laughter, camaraderie, kindness - a dynamic the producers of "Cheers" certainly know about. And they concluded that the Church of Scotland was the most impersonal, coldest institution in the village. Not universally true, thankfully, but there is enough truth in the observation to sting a bit.

Robert Raines wrote, "We belong to Christ by belonging to each other. We have no choice in the matter. Some of our brothers and sisters we may

like; others we may dislike. But they belong to us and we belong to them. Through them we move closer to Him." [Reshaping the Christian Life, p. 17]

"Through them we move closer to Him." An important observation. "And when they could not bring him to Jesus, they removed the roof...and let down the mat on which the paralytic lay."

I think that is at least in part why we are here, why we go to all the trouble to be part of this corporate experience, when we could have remained in the air-conditioned comfort of our homes watching a TV production - worship as show business - without the nuisance of all these people, and all this heat, and it is always over in exactly sixty minutes. I think we come here because we know intuitively that religion has to do with other people as well as my personal relationship with God. I believe something of those strong hands letting down the stretcher is going on in every act of corporate worship. I believe that when we put our voices to the task of singing, we are helping those who have no heart for singing; and when we put our spirits and voices to the work of praying, we are helping those who this day are feeling too weak or sick or depressed to pray for themselves. And I believe that when we stand as one and say "I believe in God the Father Almighty..." we are speaking for friends who may be standing but are paralyzed by doubt or fear or guilt and who don't this morning believe much of anything. And so when it comes to communion, I have a mystical mental picture of people helping each other to the table, and some are strong and some are not, and some are eager to be there and some are afraid or worried or anxious and some hang back around the perimeter of the room, and some can't make it under their own power and my mental picture is of people holding and helping each other up, and holding chairs for each other, and squeezing together so that there is always room and when there isn't, of doing whatever is necessary to get everybody a place at the table where Jesus can say the words they need to hear.

That is why we Presbyterians go to this immense trouble of serving communion to one another, so that we receive the sacrament, the word of God's love, not from consecrated, ordained hands, but from the hands of the man or woman or child sitting beside us. And it is appropriate - it is good - to say, "This is for you," and it is appropriate to say, "Thank you," because there is a sense in which we all need other hands to help us into the presence.

#6

John Updike wrote a short story which has something of the power and mystery and grace of friendship about it. It's called Poker Night and it's about a man who has just been to the doctor's office and has been told that he has a terminal illness and does not have long to live. He leaves the office not really knowing what to do or where to go, so he goes where he planned to spend the evening, to a poker game with a group of friends who have been playing poker every other Wednesday ever since they were all newlyweds.

> "It did seem pretty silly, at moments, sitting there with these beered-up guys (it gets pretty loud at the end) playing a game like kids, killing a rainy Sunday afternoon when I'd just been told my number was up."

He looks around at his friends' hands and notices - "we've all grown old together" and then without warning, "my throat began to go rough, they were all so damn sweet, and I'd known them so damn long... the crazy thought came to me that people wouldn't mind which it was so much, heaven or hell, so long as their friends went with them." [Poker Night, Trust Me, Short Stories, John Updike, p. 187]

to #7 Conclusion

It was one of our greatest thinkers, Karl Barth, who said once that God calls us to the humility of a servant, the thankfulness of a child and the boldness of a friend.

What are good friends for? To stand with us, to stay with us, to open up the roof and lower us into the presence of Jesus - to remind us that we have a friend, ultimately, who invites us to be guests at his own table.

All praise to him.

Amen.